American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion
Judith N. Shklar

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American Citizenship pronounces the vote and the opportunity to earn as the “two great emblems of public standing” (p. 3) in the United States, their centrality deeply embedded in the history and political theory of that country. “Public standing,” which Judith Shklar, a Professor of Government at Harvard, recognizes to be a vague notion to describe but well understood experientially, means essentially that citizens, as opposed to subjects, are entitled to respect; since it implies a sense of place defined by income, occupation and education, higher or lower, it is thus difficult to reconcile with the American democratic creed. “Standing” is most comprehensible by what it is not: it is not slavery. One who has no standing is dishonoured and scorned. The spectre of actual slavery and indentured servitude, Shklar argues, has thus formed both American citizens’ and the nation’s view of themselves as individuals and as a community.

Thus, the American past and present are replete with “a series of conflicts arising from enduring anti-liberal dispositions that have regularly asserted themselves . . . against the promise of equal political rights . . .” (p. 13). The claims of equal citizenship have been arrayed against slavery, racism and sexism which institutionalized the exclusion of blacks and women from citizenship as standing, denying them the vote and the right to earn. Indeed, their exclusion allowed citizens to define and value themselves as what they were not: black or female, and immutably different from their inferiors, whose race or sex were also immutable. “The value of citizenship was derived primarily from its denial to slaves, to some white men, and to all women” (p. 16). Today, when all adult citizens have the right to vote, they still forfeit standing when they are on welfare. “In effect, the people who belong to the under-class are not quite citizens” (p. 22).

Voting is central to citizenship because it is a statement of belonging to the polity, not just the exercise of a right. “To be a voter was thus as much a condition as a call to action . . .” (p. 27); the denial of the vote and the rejection of certain people as citizens expressed the tension between an ideology of equal rights and a deep desire to exclude some people from citizenship. Machiavelli becomes for Shklar the political thinker who best expressed the American understanding of the ideal citizen, the model military man prepared to sacrifice personal interests for the military interests of the country. Machiavelli posited this figure against the corrupt avarice and selfishness of women and of privileged men. In America, such people were hardly ideal citizens.
When men become citizens, they enter into a “morally transforming contract,” both making and maintaining the rules of community, acquiring a public conscience. The citizen is not only an individual but a member of the collectivity of citizens. The citizen thus must own himself; he cannot be a slave. Indeed, until the Jacksonian period, the voter must also own property, which gave him moral stability. If he has “rights to protect and interests to promote as a citizen, then exclusion from public life is a denial of his civic personality and social dignity . . .” (p. 39). After the Civil War, with property qualifications for the vote abandoned, race and gender served instead to exclude populations from citizenship; those with standing perpetually feared being displaced by the outsider. When confronted by those outsiders, citizens answered that blacks were “so stunted that slavery was their true condition,” and that women were “so weak as to require male protection . . .” (p. 49).

It was not that wealth or property was a sign of virtue; public education and schooling for citizenship were needed for that. Enough citizens assumed that blacks were immoral and women ineducable to deny them the vote and their rightful standing. Only when both those constituencies had “proven” their virtue—the one by fighting for the North in the Civil War and the other by participating in other ways in World War I—were they enfranchised, now able to “take care of [their] own interests” (p. 54).

Not, certainly, that the franchise was sufficient—only necessary. For blacks, Shklar argues that it wrought collective but not personal changes; “additional forms of social and political action are required to promote and protect the interests and rights of ordinary citizens” (p. 56). Women, by contrast, presented arguments for the ballot based on their superiority in education, virtue, and refinement to blacks. Thus, their victory effected no real change in their social lives, no transformation in opportunities. Nonetheless, both these groups’ agitation for the vote prevailed by appealing to the rejection of hereditary distinctions; both race and sex were precisely hereditary conditions which could not continue to deny them citizenship.

Despite universal suffrage by the twentieth century, Shklar sees large parts of the population still excluded from citizenship because “they are not equally independent, and too many do not earn anything” (p. 62). It is in the marketplace that the American citizen attains standing, social approbation and self-respect. Economic transactions are public, even if individuals earn and spend money as individuals; the rewards for work are public rewards for the “free remunerated worker,” not for the slave or the aristocrat, the unpaid or the idle. Economic independence, not public virtue, became the “ethical basis of democratic citizenship.”

Economic productivity meant gain for the individual and for the republic. Only work made one independent, self-made: the product of one’s own labours. Artistic feudalism, reprehensible to the Jacksonian, served those who received favours from kings; they were not self-made, but idle, not rich but the idle rich.
who had contempt for labour. "Education ... was designed to democratize the young and to prevent aristocratic tendencies" (p. 77). That education would teach "the working youth of America of their real place in their country ... and to make all they could of it" (p. 78). Here again Shklar sees a reaction against the spectre of slavery: abolitionists saw the planters as improvident, inactive, and poorly educated—idle, in short, and the worst sort of citizens.

Thus, Shklar sees the work ethic as a political ideology; Thorstein Veblen and Charlotte Perkins Gilman at the beginning of the century could agree that "work is the primary social act ..." (p. 87), the economic process where citizenship, its rewards and duties, resided. Despite meaningless industrial labour, despite the prevalent dislike of work, the work ethic persists; "the fears originally inspired by slavery, laced by racism and resentment of idleness at the top, were enhanced by the fear of being fired." Without earnings, writes Shklar, one is "'nobody,'" with no standing, not a citizen. Work is the source of independence and dignity. The "idle poor are no longer citizens" (p. 97). Not to work is to be reduced to second-class citizenship. One's right, finally, is the right to earn, the right "not to be deprived of one's standing as a citizen ..." Voting and earning, concludes Shklar, are the elementary components of citizenship in a democracy that claims to be equal and inclusive.

Shklar derives her analysis from classical and contemporary political theorists. At the schematic level, given the sources she uses, her exposition makes sense. From Aristotle and Bodin, to Tocqueville and Lincoln, to contemporary historians, and to political thinkers and strategists of both parties and of many ideologies, Shklar's sources direct us to think about the theory that informs rhetoric about citizenship, about community, about polity. What is missing (and what is often missing in political theory) is the lived experience of people, which may lead them to different premises, different conclusions. It may even lead them to conclusions like hers, but from different sources: not from theory, but from everyday, mundane perceptions.

While I am not asking that she write a different book, I am suggesting that within this book belongs the embodied experience of people's own lives. Without it, analyses like this one remain inaccessible, and even meaningless, for the very people who might desire to think about such questions, precisely in order to feel like citizens—not just through voting and earning, but through thinking and feeling.

While Shklar earnestly desires an inclusive society (although when she writes of the "underclass," only once does she put it in quotation marks), her own work, and that of many theorists addressing such important issues as citizenship, fails to connect with bodies and spirits; her work remains disembodied. While voting and earning are issues that citizens certainly could identify as their own, the experiences of daily life that render them real are largely absent from the book. Readers—precisely the ones who might want to think about these questions, like workers and activists and parents and adolescents and voters and earners—may feel
excluded. The specifics of their lives, and their differences from or similarities to other people’s lives, must be noted, acknowledged, so that readers, individually and later in groups as activists, can make sense of circumstances and politics. Without them, they remain sunk in individuality, the very thing that I think Shklar hopes to avoid. A quest for inclusion in the community means including minds and bodies, theories and practices, the exalted and the mundane.

My criticism here extends not only to contemporary readers but to her interpretation of historical moments. For example, she criticizes suffragist women, without distinguishing among them, for largely abandoning natural rights theory for Social Darwinism and health reforms; she writes that they had moved their argument from the thinking of the Declaration of Independence to a concern for self-development, and dismisses their embeddedness in their own time and place: “To be sure, this ideology [the need for expression] also reflected the domestic situation of these women . . .” (p. 60). Having thus acknowledged their domestic situation and “the stifling myths that encased it,” it can hardly then be ignored and derided. Shklar criticizes them for adopting “the dominant attitudes of their time and place;” the result of their doing so was that the vote for them was “the biggest non-event in our electoral history.”

If they were, as she writes, just like their husbands and fathers, were the latters’ votes also non-events? She concedes that the achievement of suffrage removed the stigma of sharing “the degrading lot of the slaves” (p. 61). The suffragists themselves understood that the vote would be only a necessary, but not sufficient, political achievement. The “non-event” was less a function of the vote, more a function of the society in which they voted. To look for early twentieth century women to be a “distinct political class,” as Shklar does, is to impose unanimity on them, glossing over their differences in ideology, social class and race. This is no longer tenable at this stage of the historiography on women’s suffrage.

Many suffragists precisely did bring their lived experience to their agitation for the vote. For some of them, that experience was more limited to the private realm than that of their husbands and fathers; but they drew on that realm for their understanding of their political futures. We can blame some of them for that (although many others had already been part of the paid work force), and claim that they should have had a greater vision of their prospects as voters; but even the most politically astute of men like Theodore Roosevelt saw things in much the same way. Just as he saw the ideal male citizen to be the soldier-citizen, he saw the ideal female citizen to be the mother of sons, eagerly raising soldiers for the state.

Indeed, some suffragists agreed that voting was a privilege “limited to the educated and respectable” (p. 58); others, resisting such an interpretation, sang the popular song, “I Did Not Raise My Boy To Be A Soldier,” incurring Roosevelt’s fury; they did not deserve to vote, he wrote. The vote was a reward for women’s work in World War I, Wilson agreed in 1920; of course he meant women’s work in the Red Cross, not in the factories. (Eleanor Roosevelt served soup to soldiers
at railway stations; upper middle-class though she was, she wrote that such work was meagre indeed compared to nursing on the battlefields. She had no illusions about the transformative meaning of her war work.) The fact remains that factory workers also worked for women’s suffrage, not as “middle-class selves” but as union activists. To overlook their presence is to homogenize the movement, and to minimize the difficulties of fifty years of agitation, day in and day out, in opposition to men who did not even want middle-class women to vote, let alone labouring women. Most of the middle-class participants recognized and acknowledged the diversity of the movement. Its success derived, they knew, from the varieties of lived experience brought by women to shape its political program.

Shklar hopes that voting and earning will remain the underpinnings of standing. She seeks, as a comment on the back of the dustjacket says, to capture “the ethos of a nation and an age.” Is it desirable, in a difficult period of fragmentation, to write of an ethos? “An ethos” suggests dichotomies, distinctions between that which is part and that which is not part of the ethos, between inclusion and exclusion. In fact, nobody in America, citizen or not, voter and earner or not, is truly excluded, if only because they are subject to law. They may be despised, have no standing, be unrespected, but they are part of the community. To seek to embrace them in the “earning ethos” may result, as it does in some Canadian, and no doubt American, high schools, in a mandatory unit on entrepreneurship, clearly founded on and designed to rejuvenate the self-made man myth, when we know that entrepreneurial enterprises almost invariably fail, and that most of us work for massive institutions. Will courses in entrepreneurship serve the ethos, or serve cynicism and disillusion? A unit on workers’ compensation, sexual harassment, and unemployment insurance might serve young people’s growing political awareness far better. The very rich, with their aristocratic pretensions, idle or not, may not suit the ethos; but they have power. Students cannot fail to see that; they need to understand not the ethos, but power arrangements and how to resist and change them. Their lived experience and their ideals could better come together in new political actions if they are offered new understandings.

Perhaps this is not the moment to search for categories of thought, or an ethos, many of them in any case, like those in this book, the categories of men’s thought, but to examine how those thoughts, even for those men, emerged from their own times and places, their own class, their own experience. Then, let us examine the diversity of our own time and place, understand what presently causes people to feel excluded, and perhaps create new ways of uniting individuals in community.